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AUTHOR Wolchik, Sharlene A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The role of the social network in adjustment takes on greater significance during the aftermath of divorce because of the many changes these networks undergo as a result of divorce. For most children of divorce, the father-child relationship changes dramatically and thus transactions within this relationship may be particularly impactful. This study examined the type of support children who reside primarily with their mothers received from fathers. Subjects (n=110) were children whose parents had divorced within the past 30 months. Children reported on the social support and interparental conflict they had experienced during the 3 months prior to the interview. Five categories of supportive transactions were measured: recreation, advice, goods and services, emotional support, and positive feedback. The results revealed that fathers played a relatively minor role in children's support networks. One-sixth of the children did not list fathers as providing any support. Forty percent had not received advice from fathers and most fathers had not provided emotional support. Mothers had provided significantly more support than fathers. Fathers' support was correlated positively with children's self-esteem. Provision of goods and services and positive feedback were especially important types of support. Higher levels of interparental conflict were significantly associated with children's symptomatology of depression, hostility, and anxiety. Enhancing the father-child relationship and diminishing acrimony between the divorcing couple might be important components of intervention programs. (ABL)

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Fathers' Social Support Among Children of Divorce

Sharlene A. Wolchik, Irwin N. Sandler &

Sanford L. Braver

Program for Prevention Research

Arizona State University

Tempe, Arizona 85287

CG 019386

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It has been argued that the role of the social network in adjustment takes on greater significance during the aftermath of divorce because of the many changes these networks undergo as a result of divorce (Guidubaldi & Clemenshaw, 1983; Longfellow, 1979). The effectiveness of support may be a function of the ability of the network to respond to the central emotional and instrumental tasks evoked by the divorce: the restructuring of family bonds. For most children of divorce, the father-child relationship changes dramatically and thus transactions within this relationship may be particularly impactful.

Although social ties are typically conceptualized as facilitating adjustment (Rook, 1984), it is increasingly recognized that there is a darker side of these ties. In the case of children of divorce, the most significant negative effects of the father's continued involvement concerns reverberations of his relationship with another primary figure in the child's network - the mother. The interparental relationship is frequently characterized by high levels of conflict prior to separation and in many cases, the degree of conflict escalates after separation. Thus, we examined the relations between children's adjustment and interparental conflict.

The present paper addresses several questions about the support that children of divorce who reside primarily with their mothers receive from their fathers. 1) What are the kinds of support fathers provide and how does this support compare to that provided by mothers? 2) Does support from fathers differ across custody arrangement, children's gender or developmental level? 3) Is support from fathers associated with better adjustment? 4) Finally, as noted earlier, we assessed

whether children's adjustment was associated with a frequent by-product of fathers' involvement - interparental conflict.

The sample included about 110 children who had experienced divorce within the past 30 months. The custody arrangements were maternal custody for 2/3 of the sample and joint for the remainder. The children reported on the social support and interparental conflict they had experienced during the three months prior to the interview. Five categories of supportive transactions were measured: recreation, advice, goods and services, emotional support and positive feedback. The breadth of the supportive relationship was assessed by the total number of functions provided, and positive attitudes toward the supporters as well as negative interactions were measured. Parental (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1979) and children's reports of children's adjustment (depression - CDI, Kovacs, 1981; anxiety - CMAS, Reynolds & Richmond, 1978; hostility - BADS, Braver, 1984; self-esteem - Harter, 1982) were obtained for the entire sample. Teachers' and noncustodial parents' reports of children's symptomatology (CBCL) were obtained for a subset of the sample. Because some of the functions (i.e., recreation and goods and services) could only occur during face to face contact, we restricted our analyses to children whose noncustodial or nonresidential fathers lived in the Phoenix metropolitan area.

Perhaps the most striking descriptive finding concerns the relatively minor role that many fathers play in their children's support networks. One-sixth of the children did not list fathers as providing any support during the past three months. In addition, 40% of the children had not received advice from their fathers whereas 56% reported that their fathers had not provided any emotional

support. Comparison of the percentage of fathers and mothers who provided each kind of support revealed that significantly more mothers than fathers provided each type of support. More specifically, across the five functions, differences between 15% - 35% occured in the percentage of children who reported receiving support from mothers versus fathers. For example, whereas 76% of the children reported receiving emotional support from their mothers, only 44% reported receiving this type of support from fathers. Interestingly, mothers and fathers were listed as sources of negative interactions equally often. However, children were significantly more satisfied with their relationships with their mothers.

One possible explanation of these differences was that our sample consisted predominantly of maternal custody families. Thus, we examined whether these differences would still occur when custody arrangement was taken into account. Whereas joint custody fathers provided significantly more support functions than did fathers in sole custody arrangements, they still provided significantly fewer supportive functions than did joint custody mothers.

Fathers provided more support for younger children while no significant relations between support and age occurred for support from mothers. Also, fathers were more likely to spend time with younger children. Consistent with other findings, the fathers in our sample spent more time with sons than with daughters.

What is the relation between fathers' support and children's adjustment? According to children's reports of adjustment, the number of support functions provided by fathers was positively, significantly associated with self-esteem and the rating of quality

of time spent with fathers was negatively associated with depression and hostility and positively related to self-esteem. The pattern of correlations between fathers' support and adjustment, as measured by parents and teachers, suggests that two kinds of support are particularly important. Provision of goods and services was positively, significantly associated with adjustment according to both custodial and noncustodial parents and teachers. Receiving positive feedback from fathers was positively, significantly related to adjustment according to custodial parents and teachers.

We explored the stress-buffering effects of social support, that is, whether social support was differentially related to adjustment under conditions of high versus low levels of divorce-related stress as well as high versus low levels of interparental conflict. No differences in relations between support and adjustment occurred as a function of level of stress or interparental conflict.

We also explored whether the amount of time spent with noncustodial parent each week was related to children's adjustment. None of the correlations were significant. This finding in concert with those just discussed echoes earlier findings on the mother-child relationship - that it is the quality rather than the quantity of interactions that counts.

The most consistent pattern of findings concerns the reverberations of divorcing fathers' conflicted relationships with their exspouses. Higher levels of interparental conflict were significantly associated with children's symptomatology across all measures. More specifically, higher levels of interparental conflict were positively related to more internalizing and externalizing problems, depression, hostility and anxiety.

Taken as a whole, the findings indicate that enhancing the father-child relationship and diminishing the acrimony between the divorcing couple might be important components of intervention programs. Provision of positive feedback and of goods and services (such as assistance with homework or transportation) would seem to be particularly important.

Clearly, these data cannot provide the road maps for interventions that Irwin discussed earlier. Instead, they provide a solid first step toward identifying aspects of children's social networks which may be causally related to adjustment. We are currently collecting the first wave of a large scale, five year longitudinal study of families who have filed for dissolution less than two months before the interview. This data base will allow us to track how the support that noncustodial parents provide changes over time and how this support both affects and is affected by the child's adjustment. Further, we will identify psychological, financial and relationship variables that predict fathers' continuing to have meaningful relationships with their children. Using these data, we plan to accept the challenge facing all prevention researchers - the translation of theory into action.

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